Reading Catholic Tradition Through the Cross: How to Embrace Catholic Practices Without Losing Protestant Faith

The Core Framework

This hermeneutical approach offers a way for those formed by Protestant theology to engage deeply with Catholic spirituality, devotion, and practice—not by converting Catholic insights into a "theology of glory" but by consistently interpreting them through the lens of the cross. Rather than treating the theology of the cross as a competing system, this framework employs it as a discipline of perception—a way of seeing that allows genuine reception without abandoning theological commitments.

What we mean by key terms:

- **Hermeneutical approach:** A method of interpretation—how we read and understand texts and traditions
- **Theology of glory:** A way of thinking that emphasizes human achievement, spiritual success, and God's power revealed in strength

- **Theology of the cross:** Luther's insight that God is truly known in suffering, weakness, and hiddenness—especially in Christ crucified

Is This For You?

You're drawn to Catholic practices (the rosary, saints' writings, Eucharistic adoration, confession) **but wonder if this threatens the gospel of grace.**

You've found popular "God's wrath/Jesus punished" presentations spiritually harmful and are looking for theological ground that doesn't make God look violent.

If yes: This guide argues for reading Catholic tradition through Luther's theology of the cross—not as one option among others, but as the way Christian faith actually works.

If no: Fair enough. If penal substitution captures the gospel for you, or if Catholic triumphalism resonates, we likely see things differently.

The Core Idea

The Problem

Many Protestants are drawn to Catholic depth but fear it means treating grace as something we supplement with our own spiritual effort. Meanwhile, some Catholic presentations sound like we're ascending toward God through achievement.

The Solution

The cross as liberation, not transaction.

The cross isn't God demanding Jesus be punished to satisfy divine wrath. It's God descending into captivity to explode it from within. Early church fathers used the "fish hook" metaphor: evil took the bait (crucified Christ), hit something it couldn't contain, and Christ's love shattered the prison from inside.

This changes everything. If God saves by going down into weakness rather than demanding payment from above, then both Protestant and Catholic distortions get exposed:

- **Protestant distortion:** Reducing grace to legal transaction, as if salvation is about getting the paperwork right
- **Catholic distortion:** Treating sanctification as spiritual ascent, as if holiness is about climbing high enough to reach God

The cross judges both. Neither tradition is exempt from turning gift into achievement. The question isn't "Which tradition avoids the problem?" but "Is this practice—Protestant or Catholic—being read through the cross or through glory?"

What This Means for Practice

Not the content of Catholic devotion, but *why* we engage it:

- **The rosary:** Repetition that lets Christ's descent sink deep—pedagogy, not achievement
- **Eucharistic adoration:** Learning to recognize the God who makes himself vulnerable under humble signs
- **Examining conscience:** Daily return to honesty about where you're still caught, so you can receive liberation again
- **The saints:** Witnesses to how deep God descended, not models of how high we climbed

The point isn't micromanaging your spiritual life. It's letting the cross's reality—God descending to liberate captives—reshape how you receive *everything*.

Plain Terms

- Prayer isn't about getting good at it—it's about showing up in your weakness where God meets you
- Saints aren't people who climbed high—they're people who let God go deep
- Sacraments aren't rewards—they're how the liberating God meets captive people
- Spiritual growth isn't upward—it's downward into truth about your need and deeper into receiving rescue
- The cross doesn't *explain* how God saves—it *shows* God entering hell itself to win
- Catholic tradition trains you in receiving rather than achieving—when read through the cross

Going Deeper (Choose Your Speed)

Appendix A: For Seekers and Practitioners

A slower walk through the framework—sitting with the ideas, working through real examples

[See Appendix A below]

Appendix B: For Scholars, Clergy, and Theologians

Theological questions, scholarly literature, unresolved tensions, and reading recommendations

[See Appendix B below]

Appendix A: For Seekers and Practitioners

The Cross: Victory Through Descent

Before anything else, we need clarity about the cross itself.

What This Guide Rejects

There's a popular way of understanding the cross—penal substitution—that presents God as demanding Jesus be punished in our place to satisfy divine wrath. This guide rejects that understanding entirely.

Why? Because it fundamentally misrepresents who God is and how God saves. It makes God look like someone who needs violence to be satisfied. It separates Father and Son, as if they're working at cross-purposes. It turns salvation into a legal transaction rather than a rescue mission.

For many people, this framework has caused real spiritual harm: scrupulosity (never sure the payment was enough), fear of God (who seems fundamentally angry), inability to trust grace (since love seems conditional on payment).

What This Guide Embraces

An ancient understanding sometimes called the "fish hook" metaphor, used by early church fathers like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine:

Humanity was held captive by evil and death. God descended into that captivity in Christ, appearing weak and defeated. Evil took the bait—crucified him, seemingly victorious. But when it did, it hit something it couldn't contain. Christ's love and life exploded the prison from within.

The cross is God's rescue mission. God wins by going down into captivity, not by demanding payment from above.

Why This Matters for Practice

This isn't just swapping one atonement theory for another. It's a different understanding of **divine power itself.**

If God saves by descending into weakness, then:

- Knowing God means learning to recognize divine presence in vulnerability, suffering, hiddenness—not in strength, clarity, glory
- Spiritual practices work when they expose us to Christ's liberating descent—not when they measure our progress
- The cross becomes the lens through which everything else is read

This is what Luther called *theologia crucis*—theology of the cross rather than theology of glory.

Working Through Real Examples

The Rosary

What draws people: The rhythm, the embodied practice, the way mysteries of Christ's life sink in through repetition.

Reading through the cross: The rosary lets God's descent remake you through patient exposure. Each decade returns you to Christ's descent, suffering, victory. The repetition isn't accomplishment—it's pedagogy. The point isn't to get good at praying; it's to let Christ's story inscribe itself in you.

After praying: You're not more spiritually accomplished. You're more aware of Christ's work for you.

Eucharistic Adoration

What draws people: The silence, the presence, the sense of something real happening beyond words.

Reading through the cross: God makes himself vulnerable under the humblest signs—bread, silence, waiting. You're not ascending to grab hold of God; you're learning to see God in the place of weakness. This is training in recognizing divine presence where it actually shows up, not where we wish it would.

Examination of Conscience

What draws people: Daily honesty, structure for self-reflection, naming what's actually happening inside.

Reading through the cross: Daily return to truth about ongoing captivity—to fear, pride, self-protection—and daily return to the One who entered that captivity to explode it. You're not tracking improvement; you're acknowledging where you still need liberation.

The relief comes from *honesty*, not from discovering you're getting better.

Learning from Saints

What draws people: Their depth, their lives that actually matched their words, their witness to something real.

Reading through the cross: They're witnesses to how deep God was willing to go to reach them.

- Francis's poverty isn't achievement—it's learning to stop defending himself so he could receive everything
- Thérèse's "little way" is staying small enough to be rescued
- Their sanctity testifies to what grace does when we stop trying to save ourselves

Their lives make you marvel at what God can do with surrendered weakness.

Reading the Mystics

What draws people: The intensity of their experience, the sense that they've gone somewhere real, the language that resonates even when you don't fully understand it.

Reading through the cross: They're testifying to how far down God goes.

- When John of the Cross speaks of darkness, he's describing God stripping away false lights we use to hide from our need
- When Teresa describes interior castles, she's not mapping an upward climb—she's describing being drawn deeper into dependence, deeper into receiving
- The "center" of the castle isn't the top of a ladder; it's the place where you stop pretending you got there yourself

The mystics aren't providing technique. They're witnessing to what happens when God strips away your attempts to manage the spiritual life.

Confession and Penance

What draws people: Speaking truth out loud, hearing absolution, the relief of not carrying things alone.

Reading through the cross: You're naming where you're still caught so you can receive liberation again. Confession is return to honesty. Penance is reorientation, not payment.

Confession leaves you having been honest about need and having heard God's promise of freedom.

When Things Go Wrong

Both Catholic and Protestant practices drift toward treating grace as something we supplement with achievement. The danger exists everywhere. Here's how to recognize it:

Signs you're reading through glory instead of the cross:

- You feel spiritually superior after practicing
- You measure your progress and feel good about the measurement
- You think God is more pleased with you because you did the practice
- You're more concerned about whether you're doing it "right" than whether you're being honest

Signs you're reading through the cross:

- You feel more aware of your dependence
- You're relieved to stop pretending you're self-sufficient
- You recognize Christ's work more clearly
- You're more honest about struggle, not less
- You find yourself returning to the gospel, not moving beyond it

But don't turn this into a new scorecard. The point isn't constant self-examination to ensure you're approaching things correctly. That's just another form of spiritual self-sufficiency masquerading as humility.

The Spirit works. You don't need to supervise. These patterns are for recognizing what's already happening—education in discernment, not a checklist for spiritual management.

Standing Beneath the Cross

Whatever the practice—reading Teresa of Ávila, praying in a cathedral, sitting with Augustine, practicing the rosary—let the cross do its work:

The cross judges all our attempts to climb. The cross shatters our theologies of glory. What remains is raw reality: a God who went into captivity to explode it from within.

Everything else—rosary, saints, sacraments, mystics—is commentary on that. The cross judges it all, and the cross sets it all free.

A Beginning, Not an Ending

This framework offers a posture for engagement, not a program for spiritual management. The real work happens in actual practice—reading Catholic theology with questions shaped by the cross, reading Protestant

theology with Catholic depth, standing together beneath the cross where all our systems are judged and all of us are saved by grace alone.

Theory exists to serve practice, not replace it. And the cross kills our theories so we can receive the raw reality of God's liberating descent.

Let the Spirit work. You're being absorbed into something larger than you can label or manage. The cross's reality is doing its work whether you're monitoring it properly or not.

Appendix B: For Scholars, Clergy, and Theologians

The Theological Framework

This approach employs Luther's *theologia crucis* as a hermeneutic for engaging Catholic spirituality from within Protestant commitments. The cross functions not as one doctrine among others but as an epistemological discipline that judges all theological claims. God is known in weakness, hiddenness, and suffering rather than in power, clarity, and glory—and this fundamentally shapes how we read all theology and practice.

Key terms:

- **Epistemological:** Relating to how we know what we know
- **Hermeneutic:** A method or lens for interpretation

Nine Guiding Principles

1. The Cross as the Rule of Knowing

Theology begins from the crucified Christ, in whom God chooses to be known under weakness, contradiction, and hiddenness. This isn't one theological locus among others—it's the epistemological priority that judges all theological claims.

2. Wisdom Distinguished from Invulnerability

True theological wisdom isn't possessing error-proof insight but remaining open to correction, repentance, and humiliation without fleeing from God. This recognizes *simul justus et peccator* while engaging Catholic spiritual realism (e.g., Thérèse of Lisieux's "little way").

Terms:

- *Simul justus et peccator:* Latin for "simultaneously justified and sinner"—we are both forgiven by God and still struggling with sin

3. Humility as Epistemic Posture

Humility isn't primarily moral virtue but epistemological stance—refusal to claim a vantage point beyond judgment, suffering, or need for mercy. This epistemic humility shapes how we approach all theological reflection and spiritual practice.

4. Devotion as Ongoing Exposure, Not Ascent

Catholic devotional practices can be received fruitfully when understood not as steps toward mastery but as repeated returns to dependence. This resonates with Catholic *conversio morum*, Balthasar's Holy Saturday theology, and Franciscan poverty theology—all emphasizing descent and dispossession over ascent and acquisition.

Terms:

- *Conversio morum:* Latin for "ongoing conversion"—a commitment to continuous spiritual transformation
- **Holy Saturday theology:** Christ's descent into godforsakenness—the theology of what happened between Good Friday and Easter

5. The Saints as Witnesses, Not Guarantees

Saints are read not as evidence of achievable perfection but as witnesses to God's mercy working through weakness. While Catholic theology emphasizes *configuratio Christi*—real transformation—this framework maintains sanctification remains fundamentally passive and receptive rather than achievement.

Terms:

- *Configuratio Christi:* Latin for "configuration to Christ"—being shaped or conformed to Christ's image
- **Sanctification:** The process of being made holy

The deeper question: Can transformation be affirmed without lapsing into glory-theology?

Working toward an answer:

Catholic theology makes strong claims about real ontological change in sanctification—something genuinely happens to you, not just a legal declaration about you. The tradition speaks of "infused grace," "merit" (however qualified), and genuine "cooperation" with God's work. This sounds like it contradicts the framework's insistence on passivity and receptivity.

But Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe offers crucial clarity. McCabe argues that divine action and human action don't compete on the same plane—it's not that God does 60% and you do 40%. Rather, God's causality is of an entirely different order: God is the ground of your free action, not an alternative to it. Your cooperation is real and full, but your capacity to cooperate is itself wholly gift. As McCabe writes, grace doesn't "interfere" with human freedom; it constitutes it at a deeper level.

What this means: Catholic language about transformation and cooperation might be saying something the framework can affirm: that grace doesn't bypass your agency but heals and enables it. You genuinely act, but your action is never "yours" in a way that competes with it being God's gift. The saints cooperated fully with grace—and their cooperation was entirely God's work in them.

The remaining tension: Does "cooperation" still imply something you contribute that makes God's work efficacious? Catholic theology, even in McCabe's sophisticated form, retains language about "merit" and claims your transformed acts are genuinely pleasing to God because of what you've become. Lutheran theology worries this inevitably compromises grace's absolute priority. This framework proposes a cruciform reading: even "merit" language can be received as describing the fruits of gift, not the grounds of acceptance. But honest engagement requires acknowledging this remains a point of theological difference, not just linguistic variation.

For further study: Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (particularly chapters on grace and freedom); also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 109-114 (on grace), read alongside Lutheran responses in the Formula of Concord.

6. Sacramental Life Without Triumphalism

Sacraments are approached not as confirmations of spiritual progress but as God's descent to meet sinners where certainty and self-justification have failed.

Terms:

- **Sacraments:** Sacred rituals like baptism and communion where God promises to meet us

The convergence and divergence:

Both traditions want to affirm God's faithfulness in the sacraments—that they're reliable means of grace, not dependent on the minister's or recipient's worthiness. But they locate that reliability differently:

Catholic theology: *Ex opere operato* makes a specific metaphysical claim: the sacrament accomplishes something objective in the very performance of the rite. In baptism, for instance, original sin is removed and grace is infused into the soul as a real quality—something happens in the person through the sacramental act itself, whether they subjectively feel it or not.

Terms:

- *Ex opere operato:* Latin meaning "from the work having been worked"

Lutheran concern: If the sacrament "works" independently of faith, doesn't this risk treating it mechanistically? Lutherans insist sacraments require faith for efficacy—not that faith creates the grace, but that grace is only received through faith. The concern isn't just about manipulation but about where the sacrament's power actually resides.

McCabe's clarification: The Catholic claim isn't that sacraments work "automatically" like a vending machine. *Ex opere operato* means the sacrament is Christ's act, not primarily the minister's merit or the recipient's subjective state. But fruitful reception still requires faith. An infant baptized in the Church receives real grace, but that grace unfolds as the person grows in faith—it's not mechanical causation but God's faithful promise enacted sacramentally.

The cruciform reading: Both traditions can affirm sacraments as places where God comes to us in our weakness, not our strength. The metaphysical disagreement about infusion vs. imputation remains, but the existential posture can be shared: we come to the sacrament not because we're worthy but precisely because we're not. Whether grace is understood as infused quality or external promise, it meets us as gift when we're empty-handed.

The honest difference: Catholics and Lutherans still disagree about what ontologically happens in the sacrament and whether grace can be genuinely "present" apart from faith's reception. This framework doesn't dissolve that difference but suggests both traditions can practice sacramental humility even while disagreeing about sacramental metaphysics.

For further study: McCabe, "The Sacraments" in *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*; Lutheran-Catholic dialogue document *The Eucharist* (1978); Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us* (Catholic perspective); Robert Jenson, *Visible Words* (Lutheran perspective).

7. Mysticism Interpreted Through the Cross

Mystical theology is received not as privileged access to divine heights but as stripping away false lights. This resonates with John of the Cross's *nada* and the apophatic tradition generally—but always read through descent rather than ascent.

Terms:

- *Nada:* Spanish for "nothingness"—the stripping away of all attachments to find God
- **Apophatic:** From Greek meaning "negative"—a way of speaking about God by saying what God is not, emphasizing divine mystery beyond human words

The challenge:

Catholic mystical tradition doesn't only speak of stripping and darkness. It also uses language of "union," "deification," "spiritual marriage," and transformative vision that sounds like arrival—like you've gotten somewhere, achieved something.

Terms:

- **Deification:** The Eastern Christian teaching that humans can participate in God's divine nature

The cruciform translation:

This framework proposes reading all mystical "arrival" language as expressions of intimacy-in-dependence rather than achievement-of-status. When John of the Cross speaks of "spiritual marriage," he's describing radical receptivity and union with God's will, not graduation from neediness. When Eastern theology speaks of "deification," it means participation in divine life by grace, not becoming God by nature.

The test case:

Can this framework do justice to texts that genuinely celebrate transformation, vision, and union without reducing them? Or does it inevitably translate mystical height into depth, mystical light into darkness, mystical arrival into ongoing journey?

Honest assessment:

Some mystical texts resist this translation. When Teresa of Ávila describes the Seventh Mansion, she speaks of stable union and transformative joy that goes beyond mere "returning to neediness." The framework must wrestle with whether it's faithfully receiving this tradition or gently editing it.

A both/and possibility:

Perhaps the mystics describe real transformation and ongoing dependence—not sequential stages but simultaneous realities. You are genuinely united to God (transformation is real) and you know this union only as utter gift (dependence remains total). If so, the framework's instinct is right but needs refinement: mystical "arrival" can be affirmed if it's understood as "arriving at the place where you receive everything."

For further study: John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Spiritual Canticle*; Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*; Bernard McGinn's multi-volume *The Presence of God* (comprehensive history of Western Christian mysticism); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (on apophatic mysticism).

8. Repentance as Lifelong Mode

Theology of the cross preserves Catholic practices of confession and penitence by refusing narratives of arrival or completion. Repentance isn't occasional event but permanent posture.

9. Assurance Located Extra Nos

Confidence rests not in interior transformation or theological correctness but in God's promise given in Christ—proclaimed and received amid ongoing fragility. This is critical given Christus Victor framing: assurance isn't about detecting that payment has been made (which would require introspection) but about trusting that Christ has already entered captivity and won (which is entirely outside us).

Terms:

- *Extra nos:* Latin for "outside ourselves"—certainty is found not in our own spiritual state but in God's word to us

Catholic complementarity: Catholic theology doesn't reject *extra nos* but adds that grace genuinely changes you in yourself—you're not just declared righteous but made righteous. The framework's concern is this could make assurance depend on detecting that interior change. Catholic response: assurance rests on God's promise in the sacraments and the Church's proclamation, not on measuring your progress. Both traditions can meet at "trust God's word, not your spiritual feelings."

Why Reject Penal Substitution?

This framework's rejection of penal substitutionary atonement isn't mere preference among theories. It's recognition that certain presentations of penal substitution fundamentally distort the character of God and the nature of salvation in ways that have caused genuine pastoral harm.

The Popular Presentation

The version of penal substitution that dominates much contemporary evangelicalism presents God as primarily wrathful toward humanity, demanding that someone be punished to satisfy divine justice. Jesus becomes the victim of divine violence, absorbing God's wrath so God can then love us. This makes the Father and Son appear to work at cross-purposes, presents divine love as conditional upon satisfaction of wrath, and reduces salvation to a legal transaction.

Theological Problems

This framework makes God's disposition toward humanity depend on a payment being made, which contradicts any meaningful doctrine of divine immutability or eternal love. It suggests that justice requires retributive punishment rather than restoration of right relationship. It separates God's love from God's justice, as if these were competing attributes requiring reconciliation within God. Most fundamentally, it presents divine power as fundamentally coercive.

Pastoral Harm

For many believers, this framework has produced: scrupulosity (never being sure the payment was sufficient or properly applied), fear of God (who appears fundamentally angry), inability to trust grace (since love seems conditional on payment), and spiritual trauma from the imagery of divine violence.

The Alternative

Christus Victor motifs present God descending into captivity to liberate prisoners. This isn't God demanding punishment but God entering into human bondage to death and evil, appearing weak and defeated, and then exploding that captivity from within through resurrection. Victory comes through descent, not through satisfying external demands. This preserves divine unity (Father, Son, and Spirit acting together), makes love and justice work together rather than compete, and presents salvation as liberation rather than legal transaction.

Substitution Without Penalty

This framework doesn't reject substitution—Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But substitution as representation and participation differs fundamentally from substitution as receiving punishment in our place. Christ represents humanity before God and includes humanity in his victorious work. He substitutes in the sense of standing in our place in the battle, not in the sense of receiving our penalty.

Connection to Theologia Crucis

Luther's theology of the cross insists God is known in weakness, not strength; in suffering, not glory; in hiddenness, not manifestation. Penal substitution, especially in its popular forms, tends toward theology of glory—it "explains" the cross as satisfying an intelligible legal requirement rather than standing in awe before the mystery of God's self-giving love.

Historical Note

This rejection targets popular modern presentations more than historic Reformed or Lutheran articulations. Anselm's satisfaction theory (which influenced but differs from penal substitution) and even Calvin's substitutionary language operated within different frameworks. But the popularized version that dominates contemporary evangelicalism has become pastorally and theologically problematic in ways demanding direct response.

Common Protestant Objections

"Isn't this just letting ourselves off the hook?"

No—but the danger of treating grace as something we supplement with our own effort exists in both traditions. Protestant anxiety about this can itself become a spiritual achievement (am I trusting grace properly? let me check again). Catholic merit language can drift into spiritual accounting (but so can Protestant assurance-checking).

The framework doesn't eliminate the danger; it provides a constant check against it in both directions. When any practice—Protestant or Catholic—becomes about measuring spiritual progress or proving ourselves to God, it has ceased to function rightly.

"Doesn't Catholic merit language contradict sola gratia?"

This is a real tension. Catholic theology speaks of "meriting" grace and uses language of "cooperation" with grace that sounds like human contribution.

The framework proposes reading merit as fruit of gift, not ground of acceptance. When Catholics speak of "meriting," they mean (at their best) that grace genuinely produces good works that are truly ours—not that these works earn our justification. McCabe's point about divine and human causality helps: God's action and human action don't compete because they operate at different levels.

But this is an interpretive move that maintains real disagreement. The framework suggests both traditions can avoid the trap of treating grace as something we supplement while continuing to disagree about how to speak of this reality.

"What about sola scriptura?"

If *sola scriptura* means Scripture is the norming norm—that all tradition must be tested against Scripture—then engaging Catholic tradition doesn't violate that principle. We read tradition *through* Scripture, particularly through the scriptural witness to the cross.

The question isn't whether to engage tradition but how to read it. This framework proposes reading all tradition—Catholic and Protestant—through the cross as revealed in Scripture.

"Aren't you denying substitutionary atonement entirely?"

No. Christ's work is substitutionary in that he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This framework rejects the *penal* framing where God demands punishment and Christ receives it to satisfy wrath. But substitution as representation, participation, and victory remains fully intact.

The question is what kind of substitution: substitution as receiving our punishment, or substitution as fighting our battle? The framework embraces the latter while rejecting the former.

"How is this different from theological liberalism?"

Theological liberalism typically reduces the cross to moral example or tragic mistake, evacuates it of any real transaction or victory, and makes salvation about human moral improvement rather than divine action. This framework does none of those things.

The cross here is the decisive divine victory over evil and death. Salvation is entirely God's work—liberation accomplished by Christ's descent and resurrection. Human transformation is real but entirely dependent on God's action. This is orthodoxy, not liberalism.

"Doesn't this make Catholic and Protestant differences disappear?"

No. Real disagreements remain about sacraments, authority, merit, justification, and more. The framework doesn't erase these differences—it proposes a posture from which both traditions might be read more faithfully, recognizing that both face the same fundamental temptations.

Where This Framework Faces Tensions

Marian Dogmas

Can the Immaculate Conception be read as testimony to grace's prevenience—that God's liberating work always precedes our response—rather than Mary's exceptionalism?

Terms:

- **Marian dogmas:** Official Catholic teachings about Mary, especially the Immaculate Conception—the belief that Mary was conceived without original sin

This is genuinely difficult. The Marian dogmas press hard against Protestant sensibilities. Perhaps they can be received as hyperbolic expressions of grace's totality—that God's saving work reaches so deep it includes even the anticipation of final resurrection. But this requires substantial interpretive charity.

Purgatory

Can it be understood not as earning one's way but as final conformity to Christ—the painful joy of having everything that isn't love burned away until one can fully receive the liberation already won?

Terms:

- **Purgatory:** Catholic teaching about a state of purification after death before entering heaven

Catholic theology speaks of "satisfying" for temporal punishment in ways that don't easily fit liberation motifs. The framework might propose: if purgatory exists, it's the process of having our remaining captivities stripped away—God completing the liberation we couldn't fully receive in this life. But the tension remains.

Papal Authority and Magisterium

Can these serve the gospel's humbling word rather than offering certainty that bypasses faith's risk?

Terms:

- **Magisterial authority:** The teaching authority of the Catholic Church

The framework is deeply suspicious of theological certainty that doesn't pass through the cross's judgment. Magisterial authority, when functioning rightly, might protect the gospel from distortion. But when it functions as guarantee of certainty apart from faith's risk, it risks becoming theology of glory.

Does Reading Against the Grain Become Dishonest?

This framework often proposes reading Catholic texts "through the cross" in ways that might not reflect authorial intent. When does charitable interpretation become eisegesis?

There's no clean answer. The framework proposes a posture of engagement, not a claim to capture original meaning. It reads tradition the way Scripture reads tradition—looking for Christ, sometimes in unexpected places. But this interpretive freedom has limits. Some texts resist cruciform reading. Honesty requires naming when we're reading with the grain and when against it.

The Method in Practice

This framework illuminates specific Catholic practices when read cruciformly:

Terms:

- **Cruciformly:** In a cross-shaped way—through the lens of Christ's suffering and weakness

The Rosary: Not as meritorious repetition but as the discipline of returning repeatedly to the mysteries of Christ's life, allowing them to inscribe themselves through patient exposure.

Eucharistic Adoration: Not as gazing upon captured divinity but as learning to wait in the presence of the hidden God who gives himself under the most humble signs.

Examination of Conscience: Not as scorekeeping but as daily return to honesty about one's ongoing need for mercy—a practice of epistemological humility.

Intercession of Saints: Not as leveraging their merit but as joining the communion of those who know themselves as beggars before God's grace.

Summary Insight

The Catholic tradition becomes most accessible when read not as a map of ascent, but as a treasury of practices, prayers, and witnesses that can only be rightly understood when the cross remains the final interpreter.

Within this framework, Catholic theology is neither rejected nor absorbed uncritically; it is received cruciformly—as material that continually returns the believer to humility, repentance, and trust in God's mercy alone.

The Broader Significance

What this articulates is essentially a cruciform *ressourcement*—a way of receiving the Catholic tradition that parallels what theologians like de Lubac and Congar attempted from within Catholicism itself: a return to sources that refuses the accretions of triumphalism, rationalism, and mechanistic sacramentology.

Terms:

- *Ressourcement:* French for "return to the sources"—a 20th-century Catholic movement that went back to early Christian writings to renew theology
- **Triumphalism:** An attitude of spiritual victory and superiority
- **Sacramentology:** The theology of how sacraments work

The beauty of this approach is that it doesn't require Catholics to become Lutheran, nor does it ask Lutherans to ignore their theological commitments. Instead, it proposes a shared posture—a standing beneath the cross together—from which both traditions can be read more truly. The Christus Victor framing intensifies this: both traditions can meet at the recognition that salvation is liberation accomplished by God's descent, not transaction completed by proper theological accounting.

What This Means for Regular People

If you're drawn to Catholic spirituality but worried about theological differences:

You don't have to choose between depth and faithfulness. This approach lets you pray the rosary, read the mystics, and learn from the saints—not as a spiritual ladder to climb, but as ways to keep returning to your dependence on God's mercy.

If you're exploring different Christian traditions:

The key insight is simple: every spiritual practice should humble you, not make you feel superior. If a prayer, devotion, or discipline draws you closer to recognizing your need for grace rather than your spiritual achievement, it's working correctly.

The practical takeaway:

Stand beneath the cross. Whether you're reading Teresa of Ávila, praying in a cathedral, or sitting with Augustine, ask: "Does this return me to humility, repentance, and trust in God's mercy alone?" If yes, you're reading it rightly. If it tempts you toward spiritual pride or self-sufficiency, you've drifted into what Luther called a "theology of glory."

In daily terms:

- Prayer isn't about getting good at praying—it's about showing up empty-handed
- The saints aren't spiritual superheroes—they're people who kept falling into God's mercy
- Sacraments aren't rewards for faith—they're how God meets us when we're weak
- Spiritual growth isn't climbing higher—it's learning to receive more deeply

This framework gives you permission to drink deeply from Catholic wells while staying rooted in the gospel truth: salvation is gift, not achievement; grace, not merit; Christ's work, not yours.

For Church Nerds, Scholars, and Clergy: A Research Map

On Grace, Transformation, and Cooperation:

- Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (especially "The Involvement of God")
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 109-114 (read with Lutheran spectacles)
- Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification (1999)
- Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith* (Finnish Luther school on union with Christ)

On Sacramental Theology:

- Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us* (Catholic)
- Robert Jenson, *Visible Words* (Lutheran)
- Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (post-scholastic Catholic approach)
- Herbert McCabe, "The Sacraments" in *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*

On Mystical Theology:

- Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God* series (authoritative historical survey)
- Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (on apophatic tradition)
- Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (Dominican approach to holiness)
- Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (cruciform reading of Christian mysticism)

On Ecumenical Method:

- Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Catholic engagement with Protestant concerns)
- Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven* (Catholic who takes Reformed theology seriously)
- Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Lutheran-Catholic-Orthodox synthesis)
- Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Luther's theology of the cross developed philosophically)

On the Theology of the Cross:

- Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*
- Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*
- Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (application to contemporary context)

Is McCabe an outlier?

No. McCabe represents a sophisticated Thomism shared by many 20th-century Catholic thinkers (the *nouvelle théologie* movement, including figures like de Lubac, Congar, and Chenu). He's writing in the tradition of Aquinas but with philosophical clarity that cuts through later scholastic accretions. His approach is mainstream among serious Catholic theologians, though his clarity and accessibility make him particularly valuable for Protestant engagement.

The Invitation

This framework is a beginning, not an ending. It offers a posture for engagement and suggests where bridges might be built. The real work happens when you read Catholic theology with Lutheran questions and Lutheran theology with Catholic depth—standing together beneath the cross, where all our systems are judged and all of us are saved by grace alone.

Cover Image: [The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, and a detail, by Hans Holbein the Younger.jpg]